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Brave Hearts and Norman Traitors

CHAPTER 1.

The Witch of Deepdale.

So calm and quiet was the day that the very sunlight seemed to be resting on the rich, glassy glades of the forest. No blade of grass moved, and not a shadow trembled on the earth, for there was not a breath of air stirring.

And yet there were signs that the long, bright summer was coming to an end, for brier and bracken were tinged with amber, and the tenderest of the wild flowers had gone to their rest.

Hundreds of thick-stemmed, wide-branching oaks flung their gnarled arms over a thick carpet of most delicious greensward, and mingled with these giants of the forest were the beech, the holly, the proud, red berry-bearing mountain-ash, the stately silver birch, and the straight, long-limbed larch.

It was the forest of Deepdale, then so named, forming an unbroken link with the wilds of Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire.

In one of the glades, sheltered by dark lines of firs, a considerable open space had been formerly dedicated to Druidical rites, for on the summit of a hillock there still remained part of a circle of unhewn stones of large size.

Four still remained upright; the rest had been dislodged from their places and lay, some prostrate

near their former site, and others on the side of the hill.

From the middle of what had once been the circle there arose a straight column of smoke. So thin and unbroken was it that from a distance it might have been taken for the stem of an immensely tall sapling. It came from a hole in the earth, a hole down which there were several rugged steps.

Below was the home of Meg Magwitch, the reputed witch of Deepdale. It consisted of one room only, parted halfway with a curtain of many skins sewn together.

The floor was composed of earth mixed with lime and trodden into a hard substance; the furniture, some heavy chairs and a table laden with queer-looking odds and ends.

From the ceiling there hung the skeleton of a creature of the pre-historic period—half-fish, half-beast; on the floor there crawled a bloated toad and a golden-eyed lizard.

Amid such uncomfortable surroundings sat Meg Magwitch. Quite a hundred years old, red-haired, bent nearly double, horribly wrinkled, and so skinny that the bones of her wrists and hands could be counted, she sat crouching and mumbling over a faggot-fire, huddling the mass of rags, which comprised her clothing, around her.

A huge grey owl, perched on the back of a chair, winked and blinked at the blaze as it shot

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fiery tongues amid the smoke, and a great black cat lay rolled up at the old woman's feet.

Suddenly she rose and, supporting her limbs on a crutch-handle stick, tottered up the steps. Then, shading her eyes with a hand, she began to mumble afresh.

"The ranger lied," she said. "I shall have no visitors to-day; but why did he bring me money, and say that if I spoke sooth and proved my power these hands of mine should be filled with gold? Gold, gold, gold!" she repeated, croaking and chuckling hideously.

Her visitors were coming, and even as Meg Magwitch stood amid the deep, mysterious silence of glade and forest, it was broken by the sound of their voices.

One was Sir Alerick Dracy, a wealthy and well-known dandy of a period when certain men with mincing manners believed them to be the true sign of high breeding, a fashion which, by the way, has not gone out of date. His rich fur hat, or, more properly speaking, bonnet, was adorned with a circle of precious stones, his long hair, perfumed and curled in ringlets, flowed over his shoulders, and his face, though handsome, was effeminate.

Sir Alerick wore a silk tunic embroidered with gold, his short cloak was trimmed with costly fur, and the points of his boots, far exceeding the preposterous fashion of the time, turned up so far as to be attached by silver chains, not to his knees merely, but to his very girdle.

His companion was of quite a different aspect. Of medium height, square-shouldered and coarse-featured, with flat, black moustache and stubby beard, he wore a costume of black, pointed at the sleeves with silver.

At his back hung a hood, with which he could cover his features instantly.

"Twice, Sir Alerick," said this man, "you have narrowly escaped making a mistake. Is it not possible for you to call me Garwood Melton—Sir Garwood Melton, if you will?"

"Pardon, your—I mean Garwood Melton," Sir Alerick drawled. "I'll not offend again. Phew! how hot it

is! How disagreeable it is for a man of quality to walk on such a day!"

"Where lives this old woman you spoke of?" Garwood Melton demanded, bending his brows. "You sent a ranger to warn her of our coming?"

"I did," Sir Alerick Dracy replied. "Would that the ranger were carrying me in his strong arms now! This heat is killing me! I vow that although we are within a quarter of a mile from the witch's den, I must sit down in the shade. Why need we hurry? Let us both sleep, and continue our journey in the cool of the evening."

"Listen to me," said Garwood Melton, placing his twitching fingers on his dagger. "I warn you that I will be no longer made a fool of! It will be time for you to drawl and crawl and screw up your mouth for fear of speaking like a man, when I am gone. You have told me that this Meg Magwitch—an assumed name, I trow—can foretell the future. I'll put her to the test; so lead on! You'd best not anger me, or I'll—"

"What a violent person you are!" Sir Alerick interrupted. "Pray you let there be peace between us. I'll walk on, though I fall and die at your feet. There—see that smoke! Under it lives Meg Magwitch."

Garwood Melton seized Sir Alerick by the arm and hurried him forward, and in a few minutes they had passed down the rugged steps and stood before the seer.

She greeted them, leaning on her stick, and gazing at them steadily from under her bushy eyebrows.

"So it was you who sent the piece of silver, Sir Alerick," she said. "Ha! ha!"

"Why do you laugh, crone?" the dandy demanded.

"At my thoughts sometimes; at what I hear sometimes; at what I see sometimes. Make what you can out of the riddle, and tell me your business."

"My friend," said Sir Alerick Dracy, skipping out of the way of the toad and inwardly cursing the owl and the cat—"my very good friend here desires to peep into the future."

"Easily done—very easily done. The

time is propitious. When the leaf begins to fall the spirits of the wood begin to wail and tell their secrets."

"Enough of this nonsense," Garwood Melton said surlily. "Get to your work, beldame, and here is gold, as an earnest that you will be well paid for your work, let it bode good or evil."

Meg Magwitch placed a small copper dish on the table, and having thrown some greyish powder into it held a lighted brand over it.

Suddenly the powder took fire, a flame rushed up to the roof and vanished amid a loud explosion.

"Sdeath!" exclaimed Garwood Melton, gripping Sir Alerick by the arm. "What means this? I am blind! My eyes smart—they ache!"

"I see! I see!" cried the old woman, through the vault-like gloom. "Grimal-kin, hooded owl, screeching toad, and crawling lizard, lend me your magic aid! Good! Good! I see! I see!"

Light came again, and discovered Meg Magwitch standing at the head of the table. The copper dish was gone, and in its place were four flat pieces of crystal.

"This is all mummery," Garwood Melton said. "I'll not believe in it."

"Wait—wait!" responded Meg Magwitch, picking up one of the crystals and rolling her head from side to side. "What would you have? I see a man of noble mien, fair of face. A generous smile is on his face and a crown upon his brow. He is the Lord of the Axe, as some dearly love to call him—Richard, the Lion-Hearted King!"

"Go on, witch," said Garwood Melton, shrugging his shoulders.

"What would you have next? The same face. It is pale, and the smile is no longer there. The gems in the crown are dull, and it hangs heavily on the brow whereon it sat so nobly."

"Say on," Garwood Melton exclaimed, craning his neck forward as he grew interested.

"What next?" cried the old woman, as she seized the third crystal in her trembling fingers. "I see another face, dark, ominous, and frowning. Ha! The crown has exchanged heads. It sits here! 'Tis him, I swear!"

"Heaven, I shall faint!" Sir Alerick Dracy screamed. "That wretched owl is flapping its wings in my face."

"Go on!" Garwood Melton cried, now half-mad with excitement. "What does the next crystal show?"

"It shows a sky ever changing, now sunshine, now shadow. And see! Streaks of blood appear across it. They grow broader, broader. Ah-h-h——"

"What means it?"

"That the dark man wearing the crown has enemies, of whom he must beware."

"Can you name them?"

Meg Magwitch took up all four crystals, and placing them in a pile, looked long and silently into them.

"Two I can name, and no more," she said at length.

Garwood Melton threw a handful of gold upon the table.

"Speak out, beldame!" he cried.

"One," replied Meg Magwitch, unmoved, "is Edward Lightfeld, the Saxon franklin, and master of Deepdale Mansion."

This announcement agitated both Garwood Melton and Sir Alerick Dracy.

"And the other?" the first-named almost shouted.

"Robin Hood, chief of the Archers and King of Sherwood Forest."

"I have heard enough," Garwood Melton said, turning towards the rough stairs, down which the sunlight was streaming. "List, beldame! We may pay you another visit, but, in any case, make no mention that we came to-day. Who owns this plot of ground?"

"I do," Meg Magwitch replied boldly. "I was born in this place. I have lived in it for more than five-score years, and I will hold it against all comers."

"By Our Lady," said Sir Alerick as he skipped up the stairs, "I do not think that there is a man living who would care to dispute your ownership. Come, Sir Garwood—come. I am sick of this place and everything in it."

No sooner were they gone and out of earshot than the old woman gathered up the gold and hid it under a stone doing duty for a hearth. Then she sat down and shrieked with laughter.

"And they believed it," she cried, with tears running down her furrowed cheeks—"yes, they believed it. Sir Alerick sought to deceive me by calling his friend Garwood Melton, but I knew him to be Prince John. Poor fool, to be so gulled by an old woman! And now you, Edward Lightfeld, look to yourself. You called me impostor and laughed in my face. Look to yourself, I say. As for Robin Hood, he knows how to look after himself, I trow—ha, ha, ha! But what is that? Grimalkin, what are you arching your back for?"

She could see nothing, and when she had crawled up the steps and tottered into the open there was nothing in sight but a stag with gilded horns, to show that it was marked for royal sport.

"I am not a witch," the beldame mumbled; "I am only a silly old woman at the best, but I know how to deceive these strong men who flatter themselves that they are wise and rule the world. Yet I know this: The time shall come when this ground I now stand upon shall echo to the tramp of thousands of feet, when great buildings shall darken the sky, and nothing shall be left of the forest but the roots of these giant trees. All else will be cast to the winds, and the love and hate of the Normans, their pride and avarice, shall lie buried with the dust."

So saying, she descended again to her den and resumed her crouching and mumbling over the fire, talking to it, coaxing it, and chiding it—for, come winter or summer, it was her greatest friend.

Soon quite a different scene was transpiring at Deepdale Mansion, situated in a clearing of some hundreds of acres in the heart of the forest. A broad path, along which two wagons could easily travel abreast, led to it, and wound its way to the road to Derby town.

The hour had arrived for the evening meal. It was arranged in a hall which showed no proportion in height and length. A long oaken table, formed of rough-hewn planks from the forest, stood ready for the Saxon franklin and his guests. The roof, composed of beams

and rafters, had nothing in the way of ornament.

At each end of the hall was a large fireplace, but so badly constructed that a large quantity of the smoke found its way into the apartment and encrusted the beams and rafters with a coat of sooty varnish. Implements of war and of the chase hung in great variety about the walls, and access to other parts of the mansion was through wide doors in each corner.

Several servants were busy arranging the various seats and tables, when Alena Lightfeld, the franklin's only daughter, a lovely girl about eighteen years of age, entered.

"Has my father asked for me, Hugo?" she inquired.

"He has, lady," the man replied. "He seemed much chafed about something. Lady, he comes."

Edward Lightfeld strode into the room. His features were rugged, and his hair fell in masses over his splendidly-formed shoulders.

Alena noticed that his left arm was bandaged with linen, on which were some stains of blood.

"Are you hurt, dear father?" she asked.

"Tush, no!" Lightfeld replied. "It is nothing more than a scratch from the tusks of a wild boar. The brute is harmless enough now, for it lies still in death outside the door. Go, attire yourself in your best, for we have guests to-night, though not of my asking."

"What! Guests at Deepdale Mansion uninvited by its master?"

"By the soul of Hengist! your surprise is natural enough," Lightfeld responded, frowning darkly. "My doors have been ever open to the poor and friendless, but now each Saxon house must be a hostelry for every Norman. Sir Alerick Dracy met me in the forest, and stated that it is his pleasure to dine here to-night and bring a friend with him. But I have other friends to meet them. Ha, ha!"

"Why do you laugh, father?" demanded Alena. "You know how I hate Sir Alerick. His foppishness is loathsome, and in spite of all his pretended

gallantry I am sure he is cruel and wicked. Must I meet him?"

"Yes," Lightfeld replied. "Alena, I dislike the man as much as you do, and for that reason I will have you near me while he is here."

"Who is his friend?"

"Sir Garwood Melton," Lightfeld replied, smiling in a peculiar manner. "Faith! I know the object of their coming. Sir Alerick has long coveted my estate, and doubtless will make an offer for it this very evening; but not the cutting of a tree-top shall he have. But go, Alena; we must make the best of these men. We will show them that we need no lesson in hospitality."

When Alena returned, clad in a black velvet gown, laced with silver, and a string of pearls round her neck, she was astonished to see her father talking to several men, who looked like yeomen of the better class.

"Alena," said her father, "these gentlemen are true and trusty friends of mine."

The men, four in number, bowed, and Alena, courtesying gracefully, said:

"Gentlemen, let me add my welcome to that which I am sure my father has greeted you with."

Astonishment was written on her face, for the men were total strangers to her, and her father had made no mention of their names.

Soon afterwards Sir Alerick Dracy and Prince John, passing under the name of Sir Garwood Melton, arrived.

Edward Lightfeld, Dracy, the prince, and Alena occupied the upper table, while the four yeomen took up positions below the seat.

"Knights and guests," Lightfeld said when all were seated, "I pray you eat, and let welcome make amends for bad fare."

The feast, however, needed no apologies. Hams, dressed in several styles, fowls, hares, and venison were brought to the lower part of the table together with huge loaves, cakes, confectionery, and honey.

For some time the conversation was of the usual kind. Hunting, fishing, and field sports were discussed.

Sir Alerick said but little, although

he occasionally honoured Alena with a look intended to express a sort of languishing admiration.

But suddenly he roused himself.

"Can it be really true," he said, turning to the master of the mansion, "that Richard our king has so forgotten what is due to the nobility as to entertain Robin Hood, the rebel and deer-stealer?"

"It is true," Lightfeld replied. "I know several men who saw Robin Hood passing through London with full fifty of his foresters clad in Lincoln green."

"Lightfeld," said the prince, looking darkly, "you are a Saxon franklin; and a man of some wealth and power, and I ask you whether you think that the king can be in his right senses to ask such men to sit at his table? I trow that you would not allow Robin Hood to set foot across your threshold."

Edward Lightfeld shrugged his shoulders.

"If the king entertained him, why should I refuse him?" he replied. "My house is open to all. I have never turned away a hungry man, and if, indeed, a prince came to my house, I would do my best to make him welcome."

"Well said," Sir Alerick exclaimed. "But, friend Lightfeld, there is another side to the question. If the king would have his people loyal, he must be loyal and true to himself. At the best, this Robin Hood is a common robber. Is that not so?"

"I offer no opinion," Lightfeld replied. "I have so many faults to answer for that I do not care to pick holes in other men's garments."

"The man who says that Robin Hood is a common robber lies," said one of the guests at the lower table.

Prince John stiffened his shoulders and glared at the speaker.

"Who are you to champion a rebel's cause?" he demanded, in deep tones.

"A man like yourself, albeit I have no handle to my name," came the reply. "I have land in my own right, and not only support my family, but help to keep certain others I wot of, who dig not, spin not, work not, but live out of the toil of the people."

"By Heaven!" Sir Alerick cried, "that is a bold speech in the presence of two Norman noblemen!"

"Gentlemen," said Lightfeld, rising, "this is my house, you are my guests, and therefore I beg that there shall be no harsh words! My yeoman friend has a right to speak, and if he did so bluntly it must be remembered that, like a simple-minded man, he says what he thinks!"

Sir Alerick and the prince affected to be highly amused at this speech, and laughed loudly.

Just then Lightfeld clapped his hands. It was a signal for wine, ale, and mead to be brought in.

"I'll give you a toast," cried the wealthy Saxon. "Here's to our king, because he was born in this land, and loves an Englishman; here's to every true man that dwells upon earth, and here's confusion to that black-hearted monster, Prince John!"

For some moments there was no response.

White and trembling, Sir Alerick Dracy placed his hand on Prince John's shoulder, to restrain him from starting to his feet.

Then the four yeomen, leaping to their feet, drank to the toast, and emptied their brimming horns to the dregs.

Sir Alerick and Prince John did not move.

"What! you will not drink to such a toast as that?" Lightfeld cried. "Tell me, what fault can you find with it? Faith, then, I'll amend it! Here's to Richard our Lion-Hearted King, and speedy death to the man who attempts to usurp the throne, no matter who he may be!"

"I drink to the king!" said Sir Alerick.

"And I!" said Prince John.

His hand was unsteady as he drank, for he was quivering with rage. When he ceased himself he folded his arms moodily.

"Shades of Hengist and Horsa!" Lightfeld cried, "a man might think that you bore more love for Prince John than the king. But let it go! And now, Sir Knights, tell me why you have

honoured me with your presence here. There must be an object, for seldom indeed do Norman nobles condescend to sit at the table of a Saxon."

"It is time I told you," Sir Alerick replied, putting aside his mincing manners and speaking sharply. "I came from the Crusades enriched with the spoils of the East, and it is my desire to enlarge my estate, to build a stronger castle, and to have more men at my command. Do you follow me?"

"Perfectly," Lightfeld replied, looking the knight straight in the eyes. "My ears have drunk in every word."

"Then, franklin," Sir Alerick continued, "I would buy your house and lands."

"I'll not sell a wisp of thatch from my roof," Lightfeld replied.

"Tush, man! Take time to reflect."

"Knight," Lightfeld responded, "you know me not. I am a man of my word, and my word is my bond. I was born in this house, as was my sire, and his sire before him. Ay, the Lightfelds dwelt here in the days of Edward the Confessor, and I'll not budge for all the money and stolen jewels that came from Palestine."

"Stolen!" Sir Alerick cried, starting to his feet.

"Give me another word for it if you can," Lightfeld retorted hotly.

"Father! father!" cried Alena, in alarm.

"Silence, daughter! I will speak," Lightfeld said. "Listen, Sir Knights! 'Save the Holy Sepulchre!' was the cry that rang through England. The king and many of his followers went in good faith to rescue the Land of the Cross from the Saracen. But what of the others? They went for plunder's sake, and Heaven frowned upon them, sending sickness, defeat, and death among them."

"By the saints! this is beyond endurance," Sir Alerick said. "Franklin, you accuse me of robbery!"

"Your own words, but expressed in another way," Lightfeld replied, bringing his clenched hand down upon the table.

"You have broken the laws of hospitality," Prince John hissed.

"Ho, there!" cried Lightfeld; "bring this man stones to throw at every sinner he meets! What laws, what vows have you not broken?"

"Let us go," Sir Alerick said. "We will shake the dust of this man's house from off your feet. We came in peace; let him be prepared for war!"

"War!" cried Lightfeld. "By the bones of the Saxons who perished at Hastings! I'll— But go; get you gone before I set my dogs at you. And as for you," he added, pointing at the prince, "I'll give you a word of warning. Next time you go to a man's house, do so in your proper name."

"What mean you?"

"I mean that you are Prince John!" Lightfeld thundered. "And as for Robin Hood, there stands he!"

Prince John looked towards the door at the far end of the hall, and saw the very man he hated and feared most. Before he could utter a word the four yeoman guests rushed to Robin Hood's side.

"Treachery! Treachery!" cried the prince. "Saxon, beware! If I have not your word to leave this accursed house unmolested, I will take such a revenge on you as you will wish that you had never been born!"

"There are no traitors here, base prince," Robin Hood said, stepping forward, sword in hand. "I came not to slay, but to protect. Oh, fools, to think that you could bring your men skulking after you without their presence being known! Some of my foresters, not exceeding a score in number, sent them flying back to Sir Alerick's castle, where they await their master's coming."

"Rebel, the hemp to hang you is grown and made into strands!" cried the prince, purple with fury.

"Take back the word to your throat again, and there let it remain," Robin Hood retorted, snapping his fingers contemptuously. "What greater rebel can be found than the man who seeks to destroy his own brother? Ha! you start! Guilty villain, I know you, and will spoil the plot you are hatching. And now go, or I will cut you down!"

Alena flung herself between Robin Hood and the prince.

"For the love of Heaven let there be no bloodshed!" she cried. "Oh, woe this hour! Naught but evil can come of it. Father, I implore you to pacify these two angry gentlemen."

"Prince," said Sir Alerick, "we will to my castle, and there consult."

"And I'll to the king," Lightfeld said. "He shall know for what purpose you came here. Away!"

Black with rage, and scarcely knowing what he was doing, Prince John flung himself out of the house, half-led, half-dragged, by Sir Alerick Dracy.

"Where is my steed?" he cried hoarsely. "Let me ride away from this nest of treason."

"Here, sire—here," Sir Alerick replied. "Quick, into the saddle. Oh, quick, I say, for there is murder in these rebels' eyes!"

Prince John turned and, shaking his fist, yelled:

"I'll have revenge—revenge!"

A peal of mocking laughter from Robin Hood and his men followed him as he disappeared in the darkness.

"Come within," Lightfeld said. "Now that those rascals have gone, we'll finish the night's entertainment right well, in spite of their threats."

"Ho, ho, ho!" cried a voice outside. "Look to yourself, Edward Lightfeld!"

"'Tis that hag, Meg Magwitch!" Lightfeld cried. "Ho, there, Hugo! Take a staff and drive her hence."

"Leave her to me," Robin Hood said. "I must go for a time. I have men in the forest, and have certain orders to give them."

"Why not bring them here?"

"Anon," exclaimed Robin Hood. "Come, Will Scarlet, and all of you. We must keep watch on our Norman foes, or there'll be mischief before the light of morning spreads."

CHAPTER 2.

The Attack on Deepdale Mansion.

"ALENA," said her father, "'tis time you went to your room. I would be alone with my thoughts."

"I'll to my room, but not to my bed," Alena replied. "Mischief will come of this, Robin Hood, brave as he may be."

will not be able to save us from the swarms of ruthless men and soldiers of fortune, who will do anything for gold. Let us leave this place while there is time, and fly to the monastery. The good abbot will protect us."

"Fear not, daughter," Lightfeld replied. "Even if Robin Hood has to watch in the forest, and the Normans contrive to steal through his line of scouts, our walls and doors are strong. Moreover, our retainers will not desert us in the hour of need."

"Father," Alena cried, clasping her hands, "I have dread forebodings. Let us leave, if only for to-night."

"What! leave Robin Hood in the lurch, and leave all here to confusion? Nay, Alena, it cannot be; if violence is to be the outcome of this night's events the more need have I to be here to avert it. Ho, there, Hugo!"

The stalwart retainer appeared instantly.

"See that the men are well armed," Lightfeld said. "That done, come with me, and we will see to the fastenings of the house. As for you, Alena, dismiss your terrors, and rely on the protection of Heaven."

So saying, he strode from the hall, and Hugo started on his errand, rousing up the men, and bidding them to be prepared for any emergency.

Soon there came the sounds of shooting of bolts, and the dropping of chains into strong iron sockets, and then Lightfeld, having made sure that his men, armed with swords, axes, and bows, were at their proper posts, returned to the hall.

Alena was still there. He did not speak to her—indeed, he did not appear to be aware of her presence.

Suddenly Hugo came tearing in.

"Master," he said, "there is a red glare in the sky, and I fear that some portion of the forest is on fire."

"It is like enough," Lightfeld replied, unmoved at the announcement. "The weather has been so dry that the brushwood is mere tinder."

"But, master, Robin Hood and his foresters may perish in the flames. This fire is no accident, I am sure, but purposely done to drive your friends away."

"Ha! I never thought of that," Lightfeld cried, starting to his feet. "Keep a sharp lookout——"

"Too late!" Hugo groaned. "I hear the tramping of horses. The Normans have taken the other path and are upon us."

"We'll fight to the last," Lightfeld cried, snatching down a heavy battle-axe from the wall. "I'll die in my own house, if needs be."

Just then a loud knocking came at the outer door.

"Open there?" shouted a voice. "The Normans have burnt us out from our hiding-place. 'Tis I, Robin Hood."

"Heaven be praised!" Alena cried. "This good man and his men have escaped the terrible death I feared would be theirs."

The door was thrown open, and soon after Robin Hood and some score of his men came pouring in, a few remaining to drive the horses into a kind of pound, fenced round with pointed stakes.

"'Tis bad news I bring you," Robin Hood said. "Prince John and that fawning villain, Sir Alerick Dracy, had laid their plans too well before coming here to-night. Their hirelings have fired a large tract of the forest, while a strong force is coming to the attack."

"Then nothing can save us," Alena cried, sinking half-fainting into her father's arms.

"Fear not, maiden," Robin Hood said. "We may be few in numbers, but our cause will prevail. Have faith! At such a moment as this despair is a sin."

"They are coming," said Hugo. "Hark to their savage yells!"

And now the noise of trampling feet and hoofs and the hoarse murmur of voices proclaimed that the Normans, rendered furious with drink and valiant with the promise of gold, were near. There seemed to be hundreds of them, and their weapons flashed in the flare of the torches borne by a number of half-nude charcoal-burners.

"Wait," said Robin Hood. "Take the word from me. Two men to each window, one on his right knee, the second erect, so that he can discharge his arrows over the other's shoulders. Not a shaft must be thrown away, but

every one pierce the varlet aimed at. Now!"

Eight arrows sped from the windows, and instantly there came the shrieks of men stricken with sudden anguish.

Eight more, and still eight more arrows sent death into the ranks of the invaders.

Checked for the time, the Normans fell back, falling over each other in confusion. But soon they rallied, pouring in a volley of crossbow bolts—which, however, did no harm, for the besieged were on the alert, and dropped on their knees, so that the bolts flew harmlessly over their heads.

Presently there came a shout from some of Lightfeld's men stationed at the further end of the hall. They had heard a loud, crackling noise, and tongues of flames leaped up before their eyes. Some of the Normans had slipped round to the other side of the mansion, and making use of a huge pile of faggots, heaped a number against the wall and fired them.

Robin Hood brought his hand to his brow.

"We have a hornets'-nest about us," he cried. "There is no safety here, and we must fight our way out. But steady, my men! There must be no haste or confusion. Look to your daughter, Lightfeld. Place half a dozen of your most trusty retainers round her, and bid them die rather than Norman shall lay hands upon her."

"Death to the Saxons!" roared the attacking mob. "Burn them out!"

"I am ready," Lightfeld said. "Let me lead the way."

Bolts were drawn, chains flung aside, the great oak door was hurled open, and out rushed the besieged.

"Shoot down the torch-bearers!" Robin Hood thundered. "And then at it with axe, sword, and halberd. Ho, for liberty! Sweet liberty or death!"

The Normans crowded round to intercept their passage.

"Yield! Robin Hood! Yield, Lightfeld!" roared a hundred voices.

Almost at the same moment the torch-bearers went floundering down on their faces, and then came the clash of sword upon sword, the crash of axe upon

shield and helmet. But still there was light enough to see, for the great heap of faggots was blazing brightly.

"This way!" shouted Robin Hood. "We must get into the shadow and fight in the dark. It is our only hope. Ho, there! Strike hard! Fight on! Fight on! Oh, that Little John were here! I missed him in the forest, and fear that he has perished."

"Nay, good master, I am here; but only just arrived!" roared the welcome voice of the giant. "I did but linger to help Friar Tuck along."

It seemed that Little John had dropped from the clouds like an avenging angel.

Wielding his ponderous axe in his right hand, and a sword in his left, he fell upon the Normans. And with him leaped Friar Tuck, delivering staggering and crushing blows with his quarter-staff in quick succession.

"We win! Victory is ours!" roared Robin Hood, scarcely conscious that he had been wounded, though the wounds were slight. "Heaven defends the right. Fight on! Fight on!"

"Yield, Robin Hood!" cried a horseman, with couched lance, rushing towards him.

Robin Hood struck the point of the weapon from him, and striking the man clean out of the saddle, took his place in an instant.

"That fellow has spoilt my best sword!" Robin Hood shouted, hurling the broken weapon away. "Give me an axe, a mace, anything!"

An axe was thrown to him, and grasping it he reared the horse into the midst of the contending mass of men and dealt fatal blows to all who opposed him.

And now the Saxons were driving the Normans back to the flames they had kindled. Back, and still back, huddled, groaning, and shrieking, the men who had come to destroy saw destruction to themselves in the stern and awful faces pressing upon them.

"How now? Who wins?" roared Robin Hood. "Where is the faithless prince? Where the recreant knight, Sir Alerick Dracy? Not here? No; I trow they have escaped. But no

matter. Their time will come! Fight on! Fight on!"

At this moment a mace hurled with tremendous force unseated Robin Hood; but he retained his axe and struggled to remount his horse; but he was again thrown down by the Normans, who again pressed upon him on every side.

Little John and Will Scarlet rushed to his rescue, cut down the men hacking and stabbing at him, and Friar Tuck dragged him out of danger.

"Our chief lives!" cried the friar. "See, here he is! Look at him! Fight on! For the love of Heaven strike hard!"

In the meanwhile some of the foresters had run round to the pound, unnoticed by the Normans, and liberating the horses they turned them upon the foe.

The maddened animals dashed, plunging, kicking, and biting, among the Normans, and then a cry went up:

"We yield! We yield!"

The battle was over, the victory won.

"Spare such as throw down their arms!" Robin Hood said as he staggered along, supported by Little John, "and drive them away. I have no wish for prisoners. Let the poor dupes go, and take to heart the lesson they have received. Support me, John! My strength gives way! I faint! I faint!"

"Where is the friar?" demanded Little John. "He understands surgery."

"I am here," replied Friar Tuck, running up. "Leave Robin Hood to me, and go, you, and help our men to extinguish the fire."

"But you are wounded," Little John said.

"A cracked crown and a scratch on my left shoulder," replied the friar. "Pshaw! I had more accidents when I went bird-nesting a long time ago; I'll look to Robin Hood. Come, Will Scarlet, lend me a hand, and we will carry our noble chief into the house. He sadly needs attending to."

When Robin Hood opened his eyes and looked around him like a man startled from a horrid dream, he found Alena at his side.

"So," he said, "all is quiet; the fire

extinguished, and the Normans gone. I ask no more; I am satisfied. But what ails me? What mean these bandages? Am I very badly wounded?"

"The good friar tells me no," Alena replied; "but he says you must keep quiet. He will be here presently."

And so the friar came, as ruddy and smiling as ever, with a patch on the crown of his head and his left arm in a sling. In his right hand he bore a goblet of something that steamed like a wassail bowl at Christmas.

"Drink this and leave no drop," he said. "It will give you new life, dear Robin. This is a concoction of wine and fragrant herbs, the mixing of which is a secret. I learnt it at the monastery, and must not divulge it until the hour of my death."

"It is the elixir of life," cried Robin Hood, returning the goblet to the friar. "I am strong again. Why should I remain here? It is my duty to see to my poor brave fellows. Tell me how many are dead? how many wounded?"

"We have lost four, and six or seven wounded," Friar Tuck replied.

Robin Hood sighed.

"Four too many good men slain," he said. "But it could not be helped. And how fared it with Lightfeld's retainers? By our Lady! they fought well."

"A similar number have gone to their last account, and of wounded there are not a few. But listen, Robin Hood; you must be calm and quiet, or I will not be answerable for the consequences. The concoction I have given you is intended to give you rest, and sleep you must. To-morrow will bring you return of strength."

Robin Hood was already drowsy, and soon his eyes closed.

"He breathes well and regularly," Friar Tuck said. "I feared nothing but fever brought on by excitement. And now leave us, maiden, and I will give more attention to his wounds. He will feel no pain and sleep through it all."

"You are a great, good, and wonderful man," Alena replied.

"I am neither great, good, nor wonderful," Friar Tuck replied. "I am

only a poor priest who have deemed it right to cast in my lot with the foresters."

Far into the night the friar went on with his merciful work, with closed doors, eating nothing and drinking nothing until his task was finished. Then, placing his hand on Robin Hood's brow, he stretched himself on the hard, bare floor and fell asleep.

In the meanwhile willing hands had repaired the damage done to the mansion and premises. Weak points were strengthened, sentries posted, and Will Scarlet, daring all, galloped to Derby town to a certain wealthy Saxon named Hugh Hudson for help. It was granted immediately, and Hugh Hudson, putting himself at the head of fifty sturdy fellows, rode straight to Deepdale, where watch and ward were kept for three long days and nights.

The Normans held aloof, so terrible had been their defeat.

Robin Hood mended apace, and on the evening of the third day he was able to take his place at the dinner-table in the great hall.

After the meeting a council was held, and it was determined that Lightfield and his daughter should go to Robin Hood's stronghold in Sherwood Forest, taking with them money, jewels, and such things as they highly prized, and there remain until King Richard could be communicated with.

Next day the departure began, and the long procession wound its way through the broad path.

Resistance to any great extent was not to be expected; but they did not think of getting away without a skirmish or two. But not an arrow sped towards them from the many places affording ambush. Indeed, the vast tract of country seemed to be entirely deserted.

So boldly and openly did the Saxons march that they passed within view of Deepdale Castle. Here the same state of things existed. The drawbridge was up, and the outer gates barricaded with huge beams of timber. Not a man was to be seen, not a banner floated from the top of the keep. Silence reigned in and around the great building.

The hearts of Sir Alerick Dracy and Prince John had turned sick, and they had flown in hot haste.

CHAPTER 3.

Friar Tuck's Startling Adventure.

ROBIN HOOD's fair was held in Sherwood Forest at Michaelmas, and, strangely enough, no attempt was made to keep the festival a secret.

From not less than four counties came the Saxons, some in wagons, others on horseback, and not a few on foot, trudging along with packs on their backs.

Showmen, mountebanks, horse-dealers, vendors of household goods and gewgaws, such as the men and women of those days loved, were there by the hundred.

The fair was held in a vast glade, and the King of Sherwood Forest, in his full regalia, received tribute from his admirers.

The morning of the fair broke without a cloud. The shows and stalls were arranged, drums were beaten, trumpets sounded, and the people, dressed in their best, crowded into the booths to see the wonderful sights, and then out again, to buy, sell, laugh, jostle, and chaff.

Then came Robin Hood, with Maid Marian leaning on his arm.

Lads and lasses danced before them, and twice a hundred bowmen brought up the rear, with Little John, halberd over shoulder, towering above all.

"My faith!" said Friar Tuck to Will Scarlet, "this is a sight to do the heart of an old man good. Look around you, lad. Not a scowling face, no hand secretly grasping poniard, no lips muttering threats! Heaven! it seems impossible that there is strife in England!"

Just then a band of mountebanks in motley pitched in front of Robin Hood and begged his attention. One carried a long pole, which he thrust into the ground and held while another, clad in Lincoln green, climbed to the top and, doubling his feet under his hands, rose and stood erect. Then came a third man attired in imitation of Prince John, who, after tremendous

efforts to reach the man at the top, fell sprawling to the earth amid shouts of laughter from the spectators.

"This may be good sport," Robin Hood said, "but we will have no more of it; so change your antics, my merry fellows. I care not to gaze on the effigy of Prince John, for, after all, he is the king's own brother."

The mountebanks, having received a gratuity, bowed their acknowledgments and retired.

Two chairs were brought and placed in the middle of the glade, and Robin Hood and Maid Marian had scarcely seated themselves when the foresters, their wives, children, and sweethearts, joined hands. And then away they went, dancing round and round, singing again and again:

"Ho, for Robin Hood the good,
The champion of the free;
Send him long life and bowmen true
To reign beneath the greenwood tree."

At length, when they could dance and sing no more, they stopped, and giving themselves a moment to fill their lungs, they sent up a shout that made the very tree-tops sway.

Robin Hood thanked the people in a few simple, well-expressed words. No lengthy speech was needed from him. All knew what he had done, and was ready to do again for their sakes.

After another rousing cheer children came and laid gifts at Maid Marian's feet. Some brought purses, the result of collections, others trinkets, while such as were too poor to bring money or goods brought sweet posies of flowers.

The same hearty thanks were accorded to all, for here was no distinction, no attempt at beggarly rivalry. They gave what they could for the love of Robin Hood and the sweetest of women, Maid Marian.

Friar Tuck and Little John walked round to look at the sights.

"What's this, in the name of charity?" Little John demanded, pointing to a show.

On the platform was a burly vagabond and a black boy. The little fellow wore a glittering collar round his neck, to which was attached a chain, such as secures a strong hound to its kennel.

"Behold a prince of Nubia!" roared the showman. "He was caught and brought over to France, thence to England, and sold to me for ten nobles. He eats fire, dances on a rope, hangs by his teeth from a cord, and can break an iron bar across his arm. Come and see! Come and see this wonder and all the tricks he can perform!"

"This will never do!" Little John growled. "We are free Saxons, and we'll have no slavery here. Ho, fellow! Has Robin Hood seen this boy with collar and chain?"

"No," responded the showman, grinning. "I am waiting for him to do me that honour."

"Let the boy go," said the giant, striding up the roughly-hewn wooden steps and reaching the platform in a couple of bounds.

"Let him go! Not for you, big as you are," the showman replied. "He is as much my property as the smart tunic you wear upon your back."

"I tell you," cried Little John, seizing the showman by the nape of his neck, "that we'll have no slavery here. Give up the boy, or I will throw you over my shoulder."

At this moment Sir Harold Maystone came running up.

"Robin Hood wants to know what this disturbance means," he said.

"Tell him from me that this knave has a poor black heathen of an urchin in slavery," Little John replied, giving the showman's neck such a twist that he gasped and howled again.

Friar Tuck thought it time to interfere.

"Ho, there, Little John!" he cried. "Bring both to Robin Hood, and hear what he says. My faith, you are strangling the man and frightening the black boy to death into the bargain."

This Little John agreed to do, but kept such a tight grip on the showman that by the time he stood before Robin Hood he was black in the face.

The King of Sherwood Forest soon settled the matter.

"Hark you, fellow!" he said, smiling in spite of himself. "You may think yourself lucky that you found Little John in a good temper."

"In a good temper!" the showman repeated. "Why, he has nearly throttled me!"

"Had I not been here he would have done it outright," Robin Hood said. "You must let the boy go."

"Then I am ruined."

"Not so," said Robin Hood. "I will give you the price you paid for him. It is my will that the boy shall be page to Maid Marian, but, nevertheless, he shall be as free as any of us."

"But who shall pay me the profits I get by exhibiting him?" the showman grumbled.

"I will see to that presently," Robin Hood replied. "Can this boy speak English?"

"I am English," said the boy, running behind Little John for protection. "This man stole me from my parents. He stains my skin, enslaves me, and treats me most cruelly."

The showman staggered, and turning pale he dropped on his knees.

"A man must live," he whined.

"And the man who makes his living in such a way must be punished," said Robin Hood sternly. "Little John, I leave him to you."

The giant pounced on the trembling wretch, and after shaking him until his teeth chattered in his head, he hustled him from the glade; then, rushing to the show, he snapped the pole supporting the tent and wrecked everything he saw.

"So much for a child-stealer and a slave-driver!" he said, coming forth, hot and perspiring after his exertions. "Now, friar, will you join me in a draught of light wine? I need it after this hard work."

But Friar Tuck was otherwise engaged. There had come to the fair a cowed monk, who, with head down, walked straight through the crowd, looking neither to the right nor left.

"Brother," said Friar Tuck, sidling up to him, "to what Order do you belong?"

"To the Black Friars."

"An austere order that," said Friar Tuck. "What is your business amidst such a scene of festivity as this?"

"Why question me?" came the re-

joinder. "Have I not as much right to be here as you?"

"No," said Friar Tuck boldly; "that you have not. Answer me quickly, how and for what purpose you came here, or I'll raise your cowl without the asking, and see your face."

"I have lost my way, otherwise I had not been here," the other replied. "Brother, point me out the path that leads to Shenstone, and I will thank you!"

"There is no such place within fifty miles," Friar Tuck said. "You are not a friar. Reveal your features, or I'll have the people about you like a swarm of bees!"

"Hist!" whispered the monk in black. "I came to warn you!"

"To warn me?"

"Yes; you are Friar Tuck?"

"I am known by no other name. Say on!"

"Come apart from this crowd. I have words that your ears alone must hear."

Friar Tuck did not know what to make of it. He knew that the clergy had mysterious ways of conducting their business; but what could this man have to say to him?

"I have no secrets from the foresters," he said. "Speak out!"

"Nay, that I will not. Be reasonable, and listen! Again I say I have that to tell you which must be imparted to you alone!"

"This way, then," said Friar Tuck.

About fifty yards distant was a clump of trees, and thither they went, Friar Tuck clutching his quarter-staff tightly and keeping his eyes on the tall, gaunt figure at his side.

"Attend now!" said the monk in black, bending down. "I have news that— Hist! someone approaches!"

Thrown off his guard for a moment, Friar Tuck turned his head, but his keen eyes caught the flash of steel, and he leaped aside, just in time to escape the point of a dagger.

"Villain!" he cried, bringing his quarter-staff down on the other's head. "Contemptible hound! It is as I half-suspected! You are an assassin in disguise!"

These words fell on deaf ears, for the man lay prone and senseless, his arms spread out from his shoulders.

Friar Tuck tore the cowl from the man's face, and then a cry of astonishment and delight burst from his lips.

"Sir Alerick Dracy! by all that is wonderful!" he cried. "I never dreamed that the knave would have the courage to come here, unless well in the rear of a few hundred troops. Ho, Little John! Ho, Will Scarlet! Ho, all of you! I have trapped a weasel."

Severe as the blow was, Sir Alerick soon began to recover, and when his vision cleared he found himself bound and held before Robin Hood.

"Send for Edward Lightfeld," the outlaw said. "I saw him just now, walking with his daughter, between the rows of stalls. I trow he will be delighted to renew an old acquaintance."

Sir Alerick Dracy said nothing, but looked about him in a stupefied way.

"What puzzles me," said Friar Tuck, "is why he should have singled me out."

"He thought he would save you the trouble of cracking any more Norman heads," Little John responded.

"The varlet picked on an old man—a man of peace," said Friar Tuck, wrathfully. "Heavens! how that dagger-point made me jump!"

Edward Lightfeld and Alena came up in hot haste. They were soon told what had happened.

"Sir Alerick," the Saxon franklin said, "you brought fire and sword to my house, and you came with murder in your heart to slay this friar who helped so bravely to repel the villains who answered to your call. I will say no more. There sits Robin Hood, and he must deal with you."

"And he will," the outlaw said sternly. "But not now, for this is our day of feasting. To-morrow, Sir Alerick Dracy, you shall surely die."

"I must be content," the Norman replied, with some show of indifference. "Had I killed this villain who calls himself friar, and crept upon you, Robin Hood, and served you the same, I would have been content."

"Bold words for a fellow who used to perfume his hair like a minstrel attend-

ing on a lady," cried Little John. "But I read more in this than his words convey. This man has not come unsupported. There is Norman chain-mail not far off, I'll swear. Ho, there, scouts! Into the forest with you."

"Bring me my horse," Robin Hood exclaimed. "Look to this villain, and see that he is fast bound. Will Scarlet, sound your horn. We'll away with our bowmen, but tell the people to take no alarm. We'll protect them."

But many of the country-folk took fright, and packing up their goods the men crowded their wives and children into the carts and wagons and set off in all directions.

The showmen, finding that little more business was to be done, struck their tents and made off with such money as they had taken.

It was a bad ending to Robin Hood's fair, but there was no help for it; and while Sir Alerick Dracy stood bound to a tree, his head inclined forward as though listening, the outlaw and his men were searching for the hated foe.

CHAPTER 4.

Robin Hood's Despair.

LITTLE JOHN'S suspicions seemed to be unfounded. There were no signs of Normans within a circle of two miles.

As for the prints of hoofs, there were plenty, but they went for nothing, as the country people had brought their horses to the forest by the hundred.

"Sir Alerick must have come alone," Robin Hood said, reining up his steed.

"On foot! Impossible!" Little John responded. "Where is his horse? Beshrew me! there is mischief afloat, and we shall do wrong if we are satisfied with what we have done."

"Tell me, then, what shall we do?" Robin Hood demanded, in a rather nettled tone of voice.

"I'd have every man that can stand and bear a weapon and blow a horn, out in the forest, and not leave it until the morning."

"That can be done, but why spread alarm?" Robin Hood rejoined. "See yonder people making their way through the forest with all haste.

Think you not that they will be stopped if there are enemies abroad?"

"Not if it is the Normans' mission to seize you."

"But why did Sir Alerick attempt to assassinate our friar?"

"He owed him a grudge, as he owes all of us," the giant replied, "and intended to make sure of him. Is it not said by the Normans that Friar Tuck deals in the black arts, and that never will Robin Hood be taken or killed while the friar lives to weave spells of magic round him?"

"The fools will say anything that comes uppermost in their mouths," Robin Hood replied. "Well, where shall we go now? This is a wild-goose chase; a-looking for needles in pottles of hay."

"I know not, but I have forebodings that there will be trouble. Hark! what is that?"

It was the sound of a horn, sharply and suddenly blown.

"That comes from the glade," Robin Hood cried. "Follow me. Listen! By Heaven! there are sounds of strife. The Normans have broken through some unprotected place. On, on! for the love of the brave and free, forward!"

"I feared it," Little John said, urging his huge horse to a frantic gallop. "They have taken us by surprise."

Not another word was spoken until the trees, opening into the glade, were passed. Then Robin Hood reeled, sick and giddy, in the saddle. Five of his men lay stretched dead on the sward, and Sir Alerick Dracy was gone.

"Where is Marian? Marian! Marian!" Robin Hood shouted.

"Taken flight into the forest with the other women," Friar Tuck said. "She knows the way to our secret retreat."

"But our other men! Are they pursuing, or being pursued?"

"Heaven only knows," Little John replied. "One thing is certain; the enemy, few or many, came lightly clad, and on swift horses, not such as often carry the heavy-weighted Normans."

Robin Hood dismounted and, in a paroxysm of despair, flung himself on the ground.

"The villains have tricked me. They have stolen my darling! Her life is dearer to me than my own life. Is there justice in Heaven? I begin to doubt."

"Have a care that Heaven does not punish you for so doubting," Friar Tuck said, kneeling at his side. "What! you give way when you ought to be strong and manly. Oh, be comforted, Robin Hood, and hope for the best, or all indeed will be lost."

"Fear not, sir," Will Scarlet chimed in with. "You have suffered trials and borne them like the Lion-Hearted King himself. Command us, and we will follow you to victory or death."

"Ay," cried Little John. "It is always idle to despair, and thrice idle now."

"Despair!" echoed Robin Hood, starting up. "Despair! I know it not, for my own sake. But Marian, my darling, my bride that is to be! But there! Away with this weakness! Let us see if this scene of death and desolation will give us any clue."

On reaching the track to which Sir Alerick had been bound they found a quantity of human hair.

"Not Marian's, I hope!" Robin cried.

"No, it belongs to the Norman," Little John replied.

"But what does it mean?"

"It seems to me that when our men were surprised they cut off some of Sir Alerick's hair, so as to hang him; but they were too late."

Nothing else did they find. The Normans had not troubled themselves to carry off any part of the provisions or wine brought to the fair for the feast, which was to have taken place in the evening, so the whole affair was wrapped in mystery.

Hastily the foresters filled their wallets with sufficient food to last them two days, and Friar Tuck having, to his great joy, found his faithful ass Balaam tethered to a tree, they set off.

All nature smiled, but the heart of Robin Hood was heavy and sad.

Soon came the early autumnal sunset, and with it a great stillness.

Away in the distance a bell was heard, and the foresters halted for a

few moments, for the vesper hour had come.

And after the stillness, the dark.

Birds and beasts went to their rest, and the trees, resting too, hung their heavily-laden branches down.

Clouds came swiftly up, and then came a sound.

"Hark! What is that?" whispered Robin Hood.

"Thunder on the hills, and wind following in its track," Little John replied.

A storm, of short duration, came and passed away, but the thunder still rumbled, and the lightning glared fitfully through the trees.

Then darkness again, and no word uttered; the horses' hoofs falling as lightly as ladies' feet on a carpet, so soft and yielding was the earth.

About ten paces apart the foresters went on, their bows resting in front of them, the strings tucked under their doublets to keep them dry.

At length Robin Hood spoke.

"We can go no further in safety," he said. "The brushwood is dangerous; besides, there are deep bogs and treacherous holes hereabouts. Is it possible that we have come in the wrong direction?"

"No," Friar Tuck replied. "Something tells me that we have made no mistake."

Bringing their horses to a standstill, they dismounted and sought shelter amid a cluster of magnificent oaks.

Some of the foresters slept, while others watched with straining eyes and ears.

Not a glimmer of light, not a sound, save the flap-flap of a bat's wings or the sudden cry of a screech-owl.

Robin Hood lay resting on his elbow, his face upon his hand.

His men knew what agonies assailed him, but offered no word of sympathy. Silence on their part was best now, so they held their peace, and now and then leaned forward to see if their beloved chief was sleeping.

Would the night never end?

Not a star was to be seen, and after the storm there had come a dead calm more depressing than the falling rain.

But the longest night must come to an end, and at length the black pall began to lift, leaving behind it long shadows that trailed through the forest like spectres.

As soon as the sun appeared the men fed their horses and then sat down to breakfast. Few were the words said during the meal.

The tired scouts came in to snatch an hour's rest, and then the word was given to mount and away.

Straight they rode to Robin Hood's secret retreat.

Some of the women had arrived there in safety, but nothing had been heard of Maid Marian.

Martha told the story, and Robin Hood listened to it with folded arms and lowering brows.

The Normans had come upon them so suddenly, cutting the bonds that held Sir Alerick, and slaying the foresters who made a hasty attempt to hang the villain.

A desperate fight took place, but the foresters, outnumbered, were compelled to save themselves.

They ran to the cover of the trees, Maid Marian running in front of them.

Other women had scattered about the forest, and what had become of them none could tell.

The whole thing was a mystery.

Robin Hood looked in a dazed manner from one to the other of his officers, but they said nothing, and only laid their hands upon their saddles as a sign that they were ready to go anywhere with him.

"Men—my brave men!" Robin Hood said at length, "I am bewildered; for all this passes my comprehension. But I must rouse myself. We will try the eastern side of the forest, on which there are farms held by Saxons, who would willingly give these poor fugitives shelter."

It was, however, necessary to give their horses breathing-space, for the poor brutes had been out all night, and not a few showed signs of lameness.

But Robin Hood could not rest until he knew the worst or the best.

"We will proceed, on foot," Little John said. "There is so much cover in

the eastern part of the forest that we shall get along quite as well without our horses as with them."

"Here is one ready to step forward at this very moment!" cried Will Scarlet, throwing up his hat and catching it on the end of his bow. "Lead us, Robin! Come along, lads! We'll have good news for our chief before the sun goes down!"

Trained to endurance, they started, Friar Tuck displaying wonderful agility, and keeping up with the rest.

Three more miles, and then another halt.

"Someone comes!" Will Scarlet cried suddenly. "Down all! Either our friends or the Normans are near."

An arrow sped through the foliage.

"I spy Lincoln green!" said Friar Tuck, in a voice hoarse with emotion. "Look! Yonder come some of the boys. But, great Heaven, what sound is that?"

"The baying of bloodhounds," replied Robin Hood. "Ho, there! forward! But wait! Father of mercies, see there!"

Looking through the long vista of trees, they saw a sight that made the stoutest heart amongst them quake.

A girl was speeding along with two bloodhounds within a few paces of her. Behind them was a Norman knight urging the brutes on.

"Tis Maid Marian!" Robin Hood thundered. "She sinks! She falls beneath a tree! Stand back, all!"

As he spoke there came the death-yell of one of the bloodhounds, shot by an archer in the distance. Then, drawing the string of his bow to his ear, Robin Hood took aim at the Norman.

The arrow pierced the Norman's throat, and uttering a cry of agony, so loud and awful that the other bloodhound turned tail and fled, he fell.

Then, shouting their battle-cry, Robin Hood's forces joined and the dusky forms of Normans vanished like smoke in a wintry sky.

Robin Hood was too full of emotion to speak. He could do nothing but rush up to Maid Marian, sink at her side, and hold her in his arms.

The foresters gathered round them, cheering themselves hoarse with delight.

Soon Maid Marian recovered so far as to be able to tell her story.

When she fled into the forest, she by some means missed the men and got lost. For some time she had wandered about, but not finding any path she kept straight on, and by chance came to a ruined hermitage. There she resolved to pass the night and wait in the hope that some people friendly to the Saxon cause might pass by. But, on hearing voices, she saw, to her horror, a number of Normans urging on a pair of bloodhounds, already on the scent. Then she rushed from the hermitage and tried to escape.

"And we have been searching for Maid Marian all the night long," said one of the foresters who had been missing. "Other of the ladies we have in safety in yonder dell."

Then came a spell of silence.

"How many Normans set upon you in the glade?" Robin Hood demanded.

"Fully a hundred. They came upon us before we had time to collect our weapons."

"What followed then?"

"We retired into the forest," the man replied, "but rallied. Robin Hood, think you we are cowards? As soon as we could recover ourselves we chased the Normans right to this district, and saw no more of them until just now."

"I have naught to say against your valour," Robin Hood replied, "and naught but sad thoughts for your lost comrades. But what of Sir Alerick Dracy?"

"His henchmen dragged him upon a horse and sped him away."

"Who, then, is this pitiful wretch?" demanded Robin Hood, turning the body of the dead Norman over with his foot.

None could conjecture until Friar Tuck had examined the features.

"His name I know not," he said; "but I am certain that I saw him among Prince John's forces when he came to Nottingham."

"At all events," said Robin Hood, "there is one traitor the less. Ho, my merry men, we will retrace our steps, and thank Heaven for this great mercy."

CHAPTER 5.

The End of Sir Alerick Dracy.—The King and his Brother.

FIVE days later five pilgrims—or palmers as they were called, for the reason that they carried palms in their hands—passed into the forest of Deepdale. They were poor, and so badly shod that the biggest of them all limped and groaned as if in great pain.

For many miles they had begged their way from door to door, sleeping in the open, heedless of rain and damp.

Two carried lutes, and one a pipe fitted to bladders something after the style of bagpipes, upon which they played, while the other two went round for alms. They had halted in the middle of a village green dotted round with houses, at the doors of which lounged men, women, and children.

It was not often that palmers, rich or poor, came that way, and the event created no little excitement, for none dare close their doors to pilgrims; and the people began to wonder whose loss it would be to feed and lodge five such sturdy fellows.

The lutes and pipes struck up, but the collection was a poor one, for the simple reason that but few of the people had money to give.

"Come you from the Holy Land?" a woman demanded, looking at the hand held open towards her.

The palmer inclined his head.

"And you have seen King Richard?" said the woman.

"Ay, that have I, and spoken to him many a time. Alms! Alms! Out of your charity, alms!"

"I have but little to give, yet out of that I will spare you a portion if you will tell me something of the Holy Land and the Crusade."

"Matron, keep your money, for I see that you are poor. May I rest awhile in your house while my brethen play? As you see, I am sorely lame!"

"I will gladly grant what you ask," the woman replied. "My husband will be back presently. Ah, me!"

"Why do you sigh?" the palmer demanded.

"Because my husband has a harsh

master—Sir Alerick Dracy, by name. The knight keeps him at work day and night for so poor a pittance that oft in the winter we go cold and hungry."

"Show me your hand, and I will read the lines upon it," said the pilgrim. "Ah, only too true! Here is care, there patient suffering, there poverty and——"

"What means this piece of gold in my hand?" the woman demanded, in a terrified whisper.

"It is yours; I give it to you!" replied the pilgrim, closing her fingers.

"Listen! You may be of service to me. I have a desire to see Sir Alerick Dracy—I want to sing him a song."

"He keeps minstrels of his own," the woman replied. "Take back your money!"

"No, no; keep it for the sake of your little children, if not for your own sake. I mean no harm; I only want to see this great knight."

"Here comes my husband," the woman said.

"His name?" demanded the pilgrim.

"Arthur Shackell."

The pilgrim limped towards the man, who was carrying a load of wood on his back, and accosted him with:

"Friend, we have met once before, although you know it not. You remember Lightfeld the Saxon?"

"Right well do I!"

"And his daughter Alena?"

"The kindest and best maiden that ever roved through the forest of Deepdale. I was in their service as labourer; but the mansion is silent now, and the once fair lands running to rot and ruin."

"You would do the franklin and his daughter a service if you could?"

"Ay, that would I!" replied Arthur Shackell. "But stay! I know not to whom I am talking. I serve a Norman now, and have already let my tongue run too loosely. Stranger, I did but joke when I spoke so well of the Saxon and his daughter. Shame on you, to try to catch me in such a trap! Who are you?"

The answer made Shackell stop and drop the bundle of wood from his shoulder.

"If that be so," said he, "I'll keep my promise; and more, I'll——"

"Hist! not another word. Go, bid your wife be quiet. Let it go forth that the palmers will stay the night with you. Have you room?"

"There is a byre at the back of my cottage," Shackell replied. "Once there was a good milch-cow in it, the gift of Edward Lightfeld; but she died, and I cannot afford to buy another. I tell you, master," he continued, "that ever since Lightfeld left, although it is not so long ago, everything has gone wrong. Prince John comes at times, and brings others with him, but nothing prospers. Look yonder at that field of wheat! Last year it yielded well; this year it is scarce worth notching a sickle about it."

"Enough for the present," said the pilgrim. "The byre will suit us well. Lead on and I'll follow. Hist! one more word. Tell your wife that her days of poverty are at an end—that Robin Hood will send her gold."

"Will send her," Shackell replied. "Did you not tell me that you have given her gold already, good Robin?"

"Hush! hush. For the love of Heaven and justice, mention not my name again, lest the very trees whisper it. I'll call my companions. Go forward, I say, and prepare for us."

The people smiled as they saw the palmers pass into Shackell's house, and wished him luck with his bargain.

"They'll get no more than black bread and sour milk," said a man as he closed his door. "My faith! they look as if they had fed on better fare than that."

No sooner were the palmers in than the great shutters were closed, the door barricaded with a huge wooden bar, and then all disguise was thrown off.

Here were Friar Tuck, Little John, with back almost broken through having stooped to reduce his height, Will Scarlet, Edward Lightfeld himself, and last, but not least, Robin Hood, the King of Sherwood Forest.

"We'll to the byre," Lightfeld said, "and then we may speak above a whisper, for it has thick walls of mud and wattles."

"My wife shall keep watch from without," Shackell said.

The good woman could do nothing but stare, for now the coarse, brown gowns were thrown wide open, and the rich uniforms of men in Robin Hood's service displayed, save in the instance of Friar Tuck, who loved his cassock as he loved his life.

At length she rose, and taking a lantern with her, pretended to be searching for some strange fowls, and in doing so made so much noise as to drown any that could possibly have come from the byre.

"Sir Alerick goes a-hunting to-morrow with a gay company, including Baron de Sache," Shackell said. "The prince has gone to Windsor to see the king, but with treachery in his heart. Only a few days ago, when the prince was here, he and Sir Alerick and Baron de Sache came near me as I lay in a hollow of a beech-tree, and this is what I heard:

"'Richard has returned,' De Sache said, 'to enrich the needy at the expense of the nobility. He has returned to call to a fearful reckoning those who have done aught that can be construed into offence against the laws and the privileges of the Crown. He returns, in fact, to punish as a rebel every adherent of yours, prince, who will not bend knee and cry for mercy.'

"'But why should we be afraid of his power?' Sir Alerick said. 'We acknowledge him to be a valiant soldier; but these are not the days of King Arthur, when a champion could vanquish an army. Richard has returned, but where is his army? They have straggled home, beggared and broken men. Richard has ruined and impoverished the country, and that being so we have a right——'

"That," said Arthur Shackell, "is all I heard."

"Faith, then," Friar Tuck said, "I will finish it for him. Says this gallant knight, 'We have a right to dispute his authority, and to choose from the blood royal a prince who is best qualified to wear the crown. That prince now rides with us.'"

"That is probably how the speech ended," admitted Robin Hood. "The prince, you say, has gone to Windsor?" he added, addressing Shackell.

"Even so," was the reply.

"If all goes well, then, I'll send the king a message, which he may be glad to whisper in his brother's ear," Robin said.

"To-morrow Sir Alerick goes shooting winged game in the forest," Shackell said. "I know this, because I am ordered to help to beat up the game."

A bland smile spread over Robin Hood's face.

"Say you so?" he cried. "Then there will be no need for me to seek entrance to the castle. By Heaven, I hold the villain in the palm of my hand!"

Just then Dame Shackell struck the wall of the byre with a stick, and not another word was spoken.

A move was made to the cottage. The door was thrown open, and once more the lutes and pipes struck up.

They had got halfway through a tune when Sir Alerick Dracy himself, accompanied by two sturdy rangers, looked in.

"What lusty vagabonds are these?" demanded the knight. "Have I not commanded that no stranger should be sheltered for a night in this village?"

"We are palmers—poor, travelling palmers, Sir Knight," Robin Hood replied. "Alms, good sir—alms. Out of your charity, alms!"

Sir Alerick burst out laughing.

"My faith, but you are a sorry lot," he said, "and would make a good mumming show at Christmas. Do you fancy that this poor wretch here can find you food and lodging for nothing?"

"We only ask for shelter," Robin Hood replied. "Shelter, Sir Knight, is granted to a homeless dog, but if our presence offends you we will sleep in the open air."

Sir Alerick made no reply, but throwing a piece of silver on the table, departed, little dreaming of the company he had been in.

Early the next morning Sir Alerick, accompanied by Baron de Sache and other friends, started for the forest.

On the knight's left wrist perched a hooded falcon, and a henchman rode at his side, carrying his crossbow. The knight was superbly mounted on a pure white horse, and laughing and chatting, for it so happened that Sir Alerick was

in the best of moods on this particular morning.

Soon the beaters got to work. Golden pheasants, partridges, and black game driven from cover flew in all directions, pursued by the falcons, and brought down by the fast-speeding bolts.

But soon Sir Alerick grew tired of hunting such small game, and desirous of bringing down something of larger size he suddenly wheeled his horse round and started in pursuit of a stag.

For more than a mile he continued the chase, and then the stag disappeared, and Sir Alerick turned his horse in the direction where he thought he could head off his quarry.

Suddenly a man rushed from behind a tree and flung up his arms.

"Sir Alerick," he cried, "a word with you!"

"A murrain on you!" the knight replied as he recognised one of the palmers. "What brings you here?"

"News—news! I trust you have not left the letters written to you by Prince John at the castle?"

"No. But, why?"

"Because—— Hist! Dismount, and I will whisper the reason. The king has heard——"

"What has he heard?" demanded Sir Alerick, leaping from his saddle.

"That you are a traitor and a villain!" replied the palmer, grasping him by the throat.

"Robin Hood!" gasped Sir Alerick.

"Ay, it is I," the outlaw replied. "Monster, prepare to lay down your life. The moment of retribution is at hand. Think of Lightfeld and his daughter! Think of the fire your hired villains lighted to burn them to death in their own house!"

"Mercy! Mercy!" Sir Alerick gasped. "It was at Prince John's orders that the deed was done. I swear it! Oh, spare me! Give me time!"

"Time!" Robin Hood hissed. "Already you have lived too long. Outraged Heaven cries for vengeance, and the curses of starving children shall follow you to your grave."

Then, casting him off, Robin Hood's sword leaped from its sheath.

"Draw, Norman—draw!" he cried.

"I had promised to hang you, but instead you shall meet your end in fair fight."

Sir Alerick sank on his knees, saying: "My end it will surely be, then; for I am no match for you, Sir Robin. Give me but a few moments to pray."

The outlaw lowered his sword as a sign of consent and half-turned away.

And that moment was nearly his last one, for like a tiger-cat the Norman sprang upon him and desperately lunged at him with a dagger.

Only a lightning-like movement on Robin Hood's part saved his life. As it was, the blade penetrated his clothing and cut slightly into the flesh.

Surely no further mercy could be shown to such a treacherous scoundrel.

Robin Hood thrust forward his sword, and the Norman was fatally pierced by its long, sharp point. He staggered back and fell to the ground, and in a few moments breathed his last.

Robin Hood tore open the dead man's tunic, and thrusting his hand into a secret pocket drew forth a packet of letters written on the finest and thinnest vellum.

"These shall go to the king at once," he said. "Ho, there!"

Little John appeared as if he had sprung from the earth.

"My horse," said the outlaw.

"It is here, sir, within a stone's-throw."

"Back to Sherwood, all of you," cried Robin Hood. "I'm for Windsor."

Almost wild with excitement and joy at his great success, the outlaw mounted his steed and dashed off at full gallop.

From town to town he went, buying or hiring fresh horses, and scarcely resting he went on until the magnificent castle of Windsor loomed up before him. Straight to the gate went he, and demanded audience with the king.

The armed sentinel laughed in his face.

"The king has enough to do without seeing leggers," he said. "But here comes the king himself, so stand back, or I will let daylight through you with my pike!"

"Heaven be praised!" cried Robin

Hood. "Your majesty, this fellow will not let me come near. Pray you stay a moment."

"Who calls?" demanded the king. "Come nearer, man, and if you have a petition to deliver I will give it attention at my leisure."

Robin Hood thrust the packet of letters into Richard's hand, and then, whispering, "The greenwood tree of Sherwood still flourishes," disappeared among the quickly gathering crowd.

The Lion-Hearted King's face paled as he glanced at the letters, and then his brow grew as dark as night.

"Back to the castle," he said, turning to the noble near him. "Bid my brother John come to me and not delay."

Prince John obeyed the summons at once.

"Richard!" he cried, "what ails you?"

"Nothing!—nothing!" the king replied. "I had forgotten to write you to dine with me to-day. Knowing that you are curious in your eating I have ordered a cook of marvellous fame to prepare a certain rare dish for you."

"It is like my own good brother to think of me," Prince John replied. "But must I dine with you to-day? I am bound for London, and then—"

"When the king commands who shall disobey?" Richard interrupted. "It is because you are leaving me for a time that I would have you dine."

So saying, the Lion-Hearted King left the apartment with a careless air.

Prince John threw himself upon the couch, evidently relieved by his royal brother's absence.

"It is strange," he muttered, "that I have not heard from Dracy or De Saxe, and that Richard should never mention them. Can he suspect? No, No! Yet I like not this suspense."

The prince then filled himself a goblet of wine, and, drinking it at a draught, passed through the open window on to the ramparts of the castle.

"Your highness," an attendant called out, "it is the king's command that dinner shall be prepared at once, and in this room."

"I will attend his majesty," Prince

John replied, with a puzzled look on his face.

When all was ready the king and his brother faced each other.

"Now, then," said the king, "let them serve."

Several attendants entered the room, placing various dishes on the table.

"Where is the special dish I ordered?" cried Richard, stamping his foot violently on the floor.

An attendant entered bearing a massive salver, over which was a silver cover.

"Place it yonder," said Richard, pointing to a vacant place immediately opposite the prince. "And now all of you retire."

Prince John began to tremble, for the king was glaring at him like an infuriated lion.

"Now, brother," said Richard, "I will be your server and show you a dish to your liking."

So saying, he removed the cover and displayed the incriminating letters.

Prince John started to his feet and staggered towards the window.

"So!" shouted Richard, "you have conspired against me—your brother, your liege lord and king! Here are the proofs of your guilt, written with your own hand. All kindness, I see, is thrown away upon you. You are a prisoner in Windsor Castle, and by the splendour of Heaven, if you strive to escape to plot further treason against me, your head shall fall—ay, were it the head of a man who was ten times my brother!"

"These are forgeries," Prince John said.

"Add not a lie to your wicked deeds!" the king thundered. "These letters were delivered to me by no other than Robin Hood."

"Great Heaven!" the prince cried, thrown completely off his guard. "If that be so, then Sir Alerick Dracy must be dead!"

"Ha! You are caught by your own words! Plead guilty, my unnatural brother!"

Prince John made no reply, but with his head buried in his hands leaned against the window.

Richard again summoned the attendants.

"This dish does not suit the palate of the prince," he said. "Now send me my guards, and tell them to see that the prince be lodged in his own apartments, there to remain until it is my pleasure that he shall go forth. And some of you go into Windsor town and inquire for the man who delivered a packet to me."

But in vain did they search for Robin Hood. He had ridden on to Uxbridge, and putting up at an inn, rested his weary head at last.

CHAPTER 6.

The Blind Girl.—A Noble Act.

THE inn was a large and commodious one, standing at the top of the High Street.

Near the archway were a number of yeomen, with samples of corn and barley, for it was market day, and the quaint little town was full of life and bustle.

There were the usual assortment of beggars and hawkers, and among them a blind girl, in the charge of a low-looking ruffian.

The blind girl was singing in a plaintive tone of voice when Robin Hood came out for a stroll.

The poor child's face instantly attracted the outlaw's attention.

"Charity, charity! good sir!" said the man.

"My faith, you are strong enough to work and earn a living for yourself and this girl, without letting her sing about the street!" Robin Hood replied. "Is she your child?"

"Who are you to ask me such a question?" the fellow demanded.

"A man who will not see a wrong done," Robin Hood replied.

"Best mind your own business," the man said. "Sing on, Eleanor! This churl gives us naught but words, and we can do without them."

"I can sing no more," the girl replied, in piteous accents. "I am so weary and so hungry. Pray you, Wybert, be not cruel, but let me rest awhile!"

Wybert seized her by the arm, shaking her roughly.

"Sing on, and loudly, too, or I'll drag you to yonder bridge and throw you into the water!"

This brought the blood to Robin Hood's face.

"You cur!" he cried, felling Wybert with a blow. "Take that as a lesson. And now, little one, you shall go to the inn with me, and no harm shall come to you."

Half-dazed, Wybert staggered to his feet.

"Let him do as he will," he muttered, "I know him. He is Robin Hood, the outlaw of Sherwood Forest, and I'll be even with him. Little does he dream that I served under Oswald de Burgh, Sheriff of Nottingham."

The landlady of the inn was a kind-hearted soul, and promised to lock the blind girl in a room until the town constable heard her story.

Satisfied with this arrangement, Robin Hood walked into the large public room and mingled with the people. He loved to hear country-folk talk and tell their joys and sorrows to each other, for then, as now, "poor are the friends of the poor."

"What news from Windsor?" cried one.

"They say that the king is there, but in such a fury that no man durst go near him."

"What ails the king?" demanded Robin Hood of the man who spoke last.

"It is hard to tell. There are all sorts of rumours afloat. Some say that there has been a plot to kill the king, and" — lowering his voice — "that Prince John has his hands deep in it. But one thing I do know for certain."

"Pray you tell me," said Robin Hood, drawing closer to the man.

"You may have heard of Baron de Saxe, whose castle is at Hillingdon?"

"Well?"

"He has been visiting some nobleman at a place called Deepdale, and only this morning the baron came home unattended and in such hot haste that the horse he was riding dropped dead at the gate."

"My friend," said Robin Hood,

squeezing his hands together, "all this is nothing to me. Pray order a bottle of wine and share it with me."

"That will I," said the man, smiling. "I know a friend when I meet one. Did you ever meet Robin Hood?"

"Never," replied the outlaw, and the statement was true enough.

"Well," the man continued, growing garrulous as he quaffed his wine, "a henchman who followed the baron told me that Robin Hood had committed a dreadful murder, and that Baron de Saxe, fearing that he might be served in a similar manner, made haste to depart."

"They tell strange stories of this Robin Hood," the outlaw said, smiling.

"Nothing too bad can be said about him," the man said. "I was at Sherwood once, but Heaven send that I may never go there again. Robin Hood set upon me, robbed me, and left me for dead."

"May the wine choke you for a liar!" Robin Hood thought. And then aloud: "Friend, you interest me. Tell me more of this great baron. Is he powerful here?"

"Almost as powerful as the king," was the reply. "All the people are with him because they are afraid of him."

At that moment Wybert came swaggering in.

"So," he said, glaring at Robin Hood, "you are still here! Where is my sister? Who dares to steal her from me?"

"She is in my charge," replied the landlady boldly, "and there she will remain until the constable comes. Sister, indeed! She is no sister of yours, but a poor creature you have hired from her wretch of a father, whom I hope to live to see die on the gibbet at the top of Gallows Hill. So go your way, or you will get into trouble."

"I owe this to you!" said Wybert, grinding his teeth and shaking his fist at Robin Hood.

"True!"

"Ay, and I know how to pay off old scores."

"No time like the present," the outlaw said calmly. "My burly friend, I

think you will find that I can take care of myself. If you want a sound thrashing, come into the stable-yard, and I will give it you."

"Wait!" Wybert said, scowling, as he backed towards the door. "I'll pay off this score in another way than with my fists."

Robin Hood snapped his fingers, and then turning to the landlord said:

"I have made up my mind to stay the night here, and will thank you to put me into a room overlooking the street."

The landlord bowed, for in Robin Hood he had found a good customer, a man with gold that seemed to burn holes in his pockets.

"You shall have my best room," he said, "and the contents of my larder shall be at your service."

"Well spoken!" the outlaw said. "Treat my horse as well as you treat myself, and I shall be satisfied."

By degrees the country people left for their homes, leaving only two or three townsmen present.

Robin Hood dined late, and had almost forgotten Wybert, when the constable came in, declaring that he could not interfere on the blind girl's behalf, for the reason that there was no justice of the peace then at Uxbridge.

"'Tis a shame—a burning shame!" the landlady cried. "I'm a wife and a mother, and I'll never give her up. Rascal, I believe you have taken a bribe from the burly ruffian who has been dragging the poor child about the town."

"This to me!" exclaimed the constable, aghast. "You shall hear of this again, Mistress Wamley. If you were a man I'd see that you cooled your temper in the pillory."

Robin Hood stepped out.

"Good lady," he said, "do not disturb yourself. I'll be answerable for all. It will be a little out of my way, but to-morrow I will take the girl to the king."

"Ha, ha, ha! That is loud talk, my boaster," laughed the constable. "Where is your authority for saying such a thing?"

"Here!" replied Robin Hood, flashing

the signet given him by Richard in the constable's face.

"Sir!" gasped the astounded man. "I humbly crave your pardon. Had I known that you were a nobleman in disguise, I would not have dared to talk as I have done."

"Oh, get you gone!" said Robin Hood. "I will see that the poor girl is safely bestowed."

"And I'll warn this Wybert that if he comes hither blustering and threatening again, he shall pass the night in the stocks."

"What a change!" said Robin Hood, laughing, as the constable went stamping out. "Now, listen, hostess! If I pay you well, will you send the poor child to London? I know of a certain man named Bowman, living in Chepe, who will use her well on my recommendation."

"I will, sir, and proud of the honour," Mistress Wamley replied. "A cart, London bound, will pass within an hour, and the child can travel by it."

"Good! Bring me writing materials, and I'll indite a few words to Bowman."

"He must be a lord at the very least," the landlady said on meeting her husband. "He can write."

In the meanwhile Wybert was wending his way towards Hillingdon Castle, an imposing edifice capable of being garrisoned with three hundred men.

The porter at the gate received Wybert surlily enough, saying that the baron was in no mood to see strangers, no matter how important their business might be.

"Tell him," said Wybert warily, "that I have some great news from Sherwood Forest."

"Come into the lodge, then, if no answer of mine will satisfy you," the porter replied. "I'll send my son up with your message, but do not blame me if the baron send some men to kick you out."

"I trow that he will hail me as a welcome guest," Wybert said.

And sure enough two henchmen came, with polite words in their mouths, and escorted him to the baron's presence.

"Keep your distance," De Sàche said. "You come in such a mysterious manner that, for aught I know, you may be an assassin."

"I come unarmed, and with no evil thought in my mind."

"Say on, then," De Sàche said. "What is this news of Sherwood?"

"Robin Hood is in Uxbridge, and lodged at the 'Stag and Crown.'"

De Sàche's face underwent a sudden and awful change.

"The villain has followed me here!" he gasped. "Robin Hood at the 'Stag and Crown'! Man, you had best not jest with me. If you have spoken true your reward shall be great; but if you have lied, you shall—"

"Fore Heaven I swear 'tis true!" Wybert cried. "Again I say that he is in Uxbridge. Shall I ever forget him? Was I not in the market-place of Nottingham when Robin Hood and his archers rescued Little John?"

"You have kept this a secret?" said De Sàche.

"I have not breathed a word to a soul but you, baron."

"Keep it still," De Sàche said. "Hover near the 'Stag and Crown,' but go not into the house. I'll surround it while all are sleeping. Robin Hood had need to say his prayers to-night, for most assuredly shall he die. Here," throwing a purse across the table, "is a portion of your reward. When Robin Hood's head has parted with his shoulders, I'll fill the purse again."

Elated, and lifted to the seventh heaven of delight, Wybert went swaggering past the lodge, scarcely deigning to look at the porter.

"Gold, gold, gold!" the villain said, slapping his pocket. "This is better than squeezing a few groats out of the singing of a blind wench."

CHAPTER 7.

How Robin Hood Escaped.—A Friend in Need.—A Gallop to Windsor.

ROBIN HOOD sat chatting to the landlord of the "Stag and Crown."

"You have been a great traveller, I suppose?" said the landlord.

"As far as most men," Robin replied;

"but I am never happier than when I am at home."

"You have the tongue of a Nottingham man," the landlord continued, twiddling his fingers.

"Have I? If that be so, Nottinghamshire has nothing to be proud of," Robin Hood said, laughing. "But, friend, what matters it to you whence I come, or whither I go? This is an inn where all men should be treated without being questioned, providing they pay their score."

"True! True!" the landlord responded hastily. "No offence, sir, no offence, I assure you. Pray grant me pardon."

"If no offence was intended, then there is no need for pardon," the outlaw replied. "What time o' night is it?"

"Near the hour of curfew."

"Then I'll to bed," said Robin Hood. "Call me when the Angelus sounds, for I must away early."

"Will it please you to break your fast here?" the host asked.

"But lightly! I'll make a heavier meal when nearer—Heavens, man, how you look at me!"

"Do I?" responded the landlord, yawning. "If so, it is because you have been such good company. If it is your pleasure to go to your room now, I'll conduct you to it."

"Come then," said Robin Hood. "I shall need no rockers to send me to sleep."

As the landlord went back to his chair the curfew bell began to toll, and there being no customers in the house he decided to close it for the night. As he went upstairs he heard Robin Hood moving about.

The outlaw was examining the room. He tested the lock and bolts, peeped into the great linen chest, and then opened the door of a cupboard reaching from the ceiling to the floor.

To his surprise he saw a long bow and a quiver of arrows resting in a corner. Both bore the royal stamp, and had evidently been left, either in mistake or by way of convenience, by a soldier.

Robin Hood tested the bow, and concluded, by the exertion needed to pull

it, that it belonged to a man of great strength.

"Who can tell but that it may be useful?" he said, as he took off his sword and hung it over the bed.

Then he went to the window and looked out.

The night was dull with a promise of rain, and the wind sighed dismally.

"What is this that ails me?" Robin Hood said, returning to the middle of the room. "During the past hour all sorts of odd fancies have crowded into my head. I do not seem to be alone. An unseen presence haunts me. Tush! Am I a child to be frightened by shadows? I'll to bed."

He flung himself down dressed as he was, and pressed his face close to the pillow; but no sooner did he close his eyes than he opened them again, and sitting up, stared at the lamp which he had left burning.

"I am not myself! I am going to be ill," he said. "As I closed my eyes, faces crowded upon me—faces horrible and malignant, and Wybert's was among them. Who rides so late, I wonder?"

A horseman went dashing by, and then silence fell again over the drowsy little town.

The horseman returned at a hard gallop, and then came a babel of sounds, the plunging of horses brought suddenly to a standstill, the tramp of feet, the jingle of arms, and then something crashed against the window.

It was a ladder.

Quick as thought Robin Hood ran to the window just as a head appeared.

It was the head of Wybert, grinning, jubilant, and confident.

"Come down, Robin Hood," he said, "I have brought a few friends to see you. Friends that will——"

He got no further with the speech.

A heavy blow from the outlaw's fist sent him shrieking to the ground below.

"Rebel and outlaw," De Satche cried, "you will do well to surrender. The house is surrounded, and escape impossible. Surrender, I say."

"To you, traitor to your king, never!" Robin Hood retorted.

"Fool!" De Satche cried. "I have fifty men and more here. Strike another

blow, and for every drop of blood you shed a dozen shall be drawn from your veins."

Robin Hood armed himself with the long bow.

"Now, De Satche," he cried, "we will see what your threats are worth. Speed on, good arrow, and free the world of another tyrant!"

"Oh, Heaven, I am killed!" the baron cried as the shaft pierced his breast.

He fell headlong into the midst of his men, and in a moment all was uproar and confusion.

A few moments later the landlord, cursing, praying, and entreating, was hammering at the door.

"Open and deliver yourself up!" he roared. "Villain! I knew you to be a robber, and now you have added murder to your other crimes!"

These words fell on deaf ears, so far as Robin Hood was concerned. He was looking for means of escape, and his quick brain hit on a plan. And it was time, too, for the house was now full of armed men, and some were coming up the stairs.

"This way! This way!" shouted the landlord. "The villain is in this room. Bring an axe, and I'll have the door down. An axe, I say!"

Robin Hood looked into the street. Not a dozen men were there. Bent on capturing the outlaw, most of them had crowded into the inn.

Slinging the bow and quiver over his shoulders, Robin Hood grasped his sword and, thrusting the ladder aside, leaped full twenty feet into the street.

Striking right and left he cleared a way to the dead baron's horse, and leaping into the saddle he spurred the brute to a frantic gallop and made away towards Uxbridge Common, and thence to Swakeleys, then a dense forest.

Reaching a thick cover of trees Robin Hood dismounted and, placing his ear close to the ground, listened. He heard no sound indicating that pursuers were on his track, but he knew that every inch of the country would be scoured.

What was best to be done? Should he leave the horse, plunge deeper into the cover, and trust to the trees for shelter?

Then came the thought—if the riderless horse was found it would betray him, so, remounting, he rode at a foot pace through the darkness.

Suddenly a light gleamed in front of him. It came from a house surrounded by a moat.

This mansion, then in the occupation of a noble of Danish descent, was pulled down and rebuilt in the reign of Henry VI., and now remains one of the most beautiful houses in England.

Robin Hood was a stranger to the locality, and to ask for shelter in such a place would be madness. He might meet with friends, but more likely he would fall into the hands of foes. Yet the glimmer had as enticing a look to him as harbour lights have to a storm-tossed mariner.

He rode on a few paces, and then stopped. Someone was moving near, and the next instant a voice startled him.

"Who goes there?"

"A belated traveller," Robin Hood replied, with his hand on his sword.

"Where are you going?" demanded the voice.

"To London or Windsor. It does not matter which."

"The man who does not know his own mind must be in a queer plight," said the voice. "Keep still. I am armed, and have a couple of stag-hounds with me."

"Friend," said Robin Hood, "I pray you let me pass. I am in no mood to be trifled with."

"Neither is Dennis Haskell, the master of Swakeleys."

Then Robin Hood caught sight of a stalwart form bearing a hunting spear over his shoulder.

"Follow me," said Haskell. "You'll not reach London or Windsor to-night, and I am not the man to turn a stranger away from my doors."

Haskell carried a covered lantern in his hand, and suddenly flashed the light upon Robin Hood.

Overcome with surprise, the outlaw raised his sword to defend himself.

"Put down your blade, or I'll stick you like a wild bear and set the dogs on you afterwards," Haskell cried,

starting back. "Why, man, you are pale and distraught. Tell the truth about yourself."

Dennis Haskell's voice had a kindly ring, and Robin Hood decided to trust him.

"Listen!" he said. "I am a Saxon, and was set upon by Baron de Saxe and his men. I killed the baron and escaped on his horse."

Dennis Haskell threw back his head and laughed.

"Say you so," he cried. "Then you are my friend for ever. You have saved me much trouble, for I had sworn to take that tyrant's life. Your name?"

"Robin Hood."

"Then give me your hand," Dennis Haskell said. "I am proud to meet the hero whose name is in the mouth of every man in England. Not only will I give you bed and board, but lend you money if you require it."

"Thanks! I have sufficient money for my present use."

"Then you shall be my guest just as long as you please."

"I must be away in the morning," Robin Hood said.

"So soon; then I must be content with your company to-night."

So saying, Haskell took the bridle of the outlaw's horse and led it to the side of the moat.

A blast of a horn was the signal for a bridge to be lowered, and in two minutes Robin Hood and his new-found friend were in the mansion.

"Now you are safe," said Haskell. "Sit you down and eat and drink your fill. One day, perchance, I may come to Sherwood Forest."

"Heaven send you quickly, and a sure welcome will await you," said Robin Hood.

He had now the opportunity of seeing what his host was really like.

Haskell had a magnificent face full of character. His long bronze hair fell over his shoulders like a lion's mane, and there was strength and determination in his every movement.

"Fore Heaven!" he said, drinking deeply, "Baron de Saxe has been the curse of Middlesex. He was the friend of that arch-villain, Prince John, and

if you could only send sword or arrow through him you would be doing a good service to his brother Richard and England."

Robin Hood then told what had brought him to Windsor, and Haskell, rising, paced the room with folded arms.

"Had Richard stayed at home without mixing himself up with the riff-raff of Europe, this would never have happened. I fear the worst. There are rumours of strife with France, and Richard is too valiant a soldier to keep at home when there is the prospect of a fight."

"Fear not," said Robin Hood. "Even if Richard leaves England again, I will keep within touch of Prince John."

"When I think of what is going on my blood boils," Haskell said. "This prince is surrounded by all the traitors in the country. With gaping mouths and outstretched hands, they are waiting for favours promised when Richard is dead. Unhappy country! You are a Saxon; I a Dane."

"True!" Robin Hood replied; "but in times gone by your ancestors and mine fought for the mastery in the open field."

"And the best men won," said Haskell. "Ha! here comes the supper!"

They sat so long talking that at length Robin Hood was fain to plead fatigue.

"Come, then," said Haskell, "I will show you a place where you can sleep and dream. But listen! The hounds bark! The baron's retainers are on the alert. Sit you still while I speak to them."

Dennis Haskell, taking a cross-bow from the wall and whistling to his hounds, passed out of the house and reached the side of the moat.

"Ho, there!" he cried. "What manner of men are you that come trampling over my land so late at night? Speak, or I'll give some of you cause to make more noise than you wot of!"

"The Baron de Saxe is dead—murdered!" responded a deep voice.

"No matter how he was killed," Haskell replied; "he died a murderer's death. But," he added, laughing, "there is not much chance of his meet-

ing any of his innocent victims. He has gone to a different place."

"I asked you not for such insolence," said the man on the other side of the moat. "We are searching for a rebel known as Robin Hood."

"Then search for him, and leave me in peace," Haskell retorted.

"We thought he might have come this way."

"You are welcome to your thoughts," the Dane said. "Robin Hood lives in Sherwood Forest. Go you, and look for him there!"

"More insolence!"

"Look to yourselves, there!" Haskell thundered. "I will have no varlets prowling about my estate, whether they be hunting rebels or deer. Begone, or I will rouse up my men, and some of you shall feed the fish in the moat!"

The searchers for Robin Hood now thought it time to go, for not only was the Dane renowned for his fighting qualities, but he had some well-trained warriors in his service. In hot haste they scampered away, and Haskell, sending a peal of derisive laughter after them, returned to the house.

"They will not come again to-night, but there may be trouble in the morning," he said to Robin Hood. "You had better make up your mind to lie quiet here for a few days."

"I would if I could—indeed, if I dared," the outlaw replied. "My men expect me within three days, and if I remain absent they will be marching to meet me, and perhaps getting into mischief, for Dracy's men will be looking out for them."

"Well, the risk is yours, not mine," Dennis Haskell said. "We'll to bed now; and I will call you at daybreak. Your horse shall be ready."

"My horse is still at the 'Stag and Crown,'" said Robin Hood sadly, "but I must be satisfied with the exchange. It will be some satisfaction to know that I shall ride the very steed on which De Saxe set forth to destroy me."

"You could not take a better prize with you to Sherwood—if you get there," Dennis Haskell said. "But, there, I will not creak. You have gone through so much that I doubt not but

that you will come out of this trifling scrimmage with flying colours."

The grim humour of the Dane amused Robin Hood. They parted, and shook hands at the door of a comfortable apartment. The bed was snow-white with homespun linen, and the floor thickly strewn with rugs and skins.

Never had a bed seemed so delicious to Robin Hood. As his tired limbs sank into the sea of yielding down he breathed a prayer of thankfulness and fell asleep.

And lo! there came to him a dream so vivid and realistic that it haunted him for many a day.

He thought he was wandering through a town which was unknown to him. The houses were of foreign build, for there were towers and minarets of strange yet beautiful shape. The sun blazed in a sky of such lovely blue as he had never seen.

But suddenly a storm arose. The lightning ran through the streets, the

thunder crashed with an awful sound, and then the earth began to quiver.

In his dream Robin Hood ran to the door of a house. It was closed against him, and at the window-seat, far above his head, he saw the grinning face of Prince John.

"Villain!" Robin Hood cried. "So I have tracked you to your haunt."

Then, hearing a dismal voice in his ear, he turned, and saw Richard, the Lion-Hearted King. His face was pale, and there were streaks of blood upon it.

The king was in full armour, his breast-plate covered with a coat bearing the royal arms; but they were of one colour, red—red with the king's blood!

Robin Hood awoke bathed with perspiration, and in such terror as he had never experienced.

What did the dream mean? Was the king already dead? Had his black-hearted brother murdered one of the bravest and noblest-hearted men that ever breathed?

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The outlaw could sleep no more. He rose from his bed and, dashing water copiously over his face, walked to the window.

The first streak of dawn was in the eastern sky, and as it widened and flushed with rosy light, the birds began to warble their matin songs.

Beyond the forest and on the uplands a light mist hung, telling that the day would be fine.

A herd of deer came trotting nervously out of a copse to drink at the moat, fed by hundreds of springs and the waters that came down from the hills.

There was life, and hope, and joy in the scene, but Robin Hood's dream oppressed him, and he was standing moody and sad, when Dennis Haskell came in to tell him that day had come.

"All is ready for your departure, if you will go," the Dane said; "but you must not depart without breaking your fast, and well, too. A hungry man is a poor creature at the best, and I do not suppose that you will care to call at an inn within twenty miles. So come; follow me, and I will not join you at the table, but see you safely out of my domain."

In less than half an hour they were riding side by side through the beautiful park, and at length reached a road leading to the picturesque village of Ickenham.

"Yonder is your way," Haskell said, pointing to the west. "You will pass through Denham, across the Oxford Road, and another will take you to Stoke, and then Windsor is but a short distance. Farewell, Robin Hood. I would go further with you, but if I were seen in your company it would lead to disaster."

"I hold you to your promise to visit me at Sherwood Forest," Robin Hood said, gripping his hand warmly.

"You shall see me perchance sooner than you think," Dennis Haskell replied. "Once more fare you well, wherever you may go, and Heaven be with you and your cause."

And they parted, and Robin Hood rode at a brisk pace through the sweetness of the early morning. He had not

told his dream to Dennis Haskell, and tried to put it away from his mind, but in vain.

Not a human being did he meet until halfway through the village of Denham, when an old man hailed him.

"Stranger," he said, "have you heard the news?"

"What is it, grandfather?" the outlaw said.

"There's been a terrible scene at Uxbridge," the old man replied. "Robin Hood——"

"Oh, nonsense!" the outlaw interrupted. "How is it possible for Robin Hood to be here, when he lives miles and miles away?"

"It's true enough," the ancient rustic said. "And what's more, I tell you that from Uxbridge to Rush Green, and from there as far as Gerard's Cross, there be men looking after him."

"I'll look after him, too," responded Robin Hood. "Thanks, old friend, for the news."

He rode on again, thankful that Dennis Haskell had the forethought to change the harness of his horse.

But the outlaw knew that he must be careful. The sides of the road were thickly wooded, affording safe hiding-places for a lurking foe.

Robin crossed the Oxford Road, and plunged into the narrow lanes leading to Stoke, a scattered village, now the town of Slough. Away to the west lay the land of magnificent trees, Burnham Beeches, a region so little changed that on a quiet summer day one might almost expect to meet a hunting-party of lords and ladies with falcons on their wrists, and liveried pages leading leashed hounds.

Robin Hood had begun to breathe with hope that he would reach Windsor without encountering an adventure, for which he had no relish just then, when a band of horsemen came clattering round a corner.

"Normans," said Robin, "and if I do not show them a clean pair of heels I shall be back again at Uxbridge, dead or alive."

He set his horse at a hedge, but he had already been seen. Two of the band crashed their steeds through the hedge,

straggling barrier of thorns, and darted to head off the king of the outlaws.

Robin Hood, mounted as he was, could have laughed at their efforts to seize him; but, to his dismay, his horse, in clearing a patch of rush-grown quag which intersected the meadow, landed on the spongy ground and, sinking fetlock-deep, stumbled, flinging its rider headlong out of the saddle.

In a flash the Normans were upon him, and almost before he could regain his feet one stooped in his saddle as he dashed past and made a desperate blow at Robin's head with a heavy, steel-studded mace.

The outlaw ducked, and whipping out his sword stood on guard to receive the attack of the second Norman, who had reined in his mount and was circling round, watching for an opportunity to swerve in and cut his victim down.

Robin Hood saw that if he was to escape he must bring the unequal contest to an end instantly, for already the remainder of the band was thundering down towards him.

Casting one swift glance round he saw that his own horse had recovered itself and was trotting some thirty yards away, as if conscious of the disaster it had brought upon its rider.

His two immediate opponents, with cries of exultation on their lips, suddenly swerved and closed in upon him from opposite points.

Robin Hood crouched like a tiger at bay, though there was nothing of despair in the keen flash of his eyes.

He made a circling cut and accidentally slashed the wretched horse of one of his antagonists across the nostrils, causing it to rear upon its haunches and roll backwards over its startled master.

With a sudden spring Robin then leaped at the other Norman, parrying the downward stroke of the mace with his blade, and the next instant bringing him down with a fatal thrust.

Then dropping his sword he took a few strides and vaulted into the saddle of his own steed.

He was almost too late, however.

The leader of the oncoming band was close upon the haunches of his horse

ere he could drive his spurs into its quivering flanks.

"Yield thee, Robin Hood!" he roared, his sword upraised to cut the outlaw down. "Yield thee, or I'll split thee in twain!"

With only the bow and sheaf of arrows, which, though slung upon his back, had fortunately escaped in his fall, Robin Hood was in perilous plight, but he did not flinch.

"Robin Hood dies, but does not yield!" he answered defiantly, and crouched low upon his galloping horse, in the slender hope that the Norman's blow might fall short of its mark.

They had now outdistanced the rest of the band by full fifty yards, but the Norman drew closer inch by inch, and still the sword gleamed high as he waited for an opportunity to strike.

A low hedge lay in front of them, but in the horrible fascination of the chase neither had noticed it.

Robin's mount, with its comparatively light burden in the saddle, rose straight as a bird and cleared the tangled briars; but the Norman's horse, already blown in its desperate gallop and weighed down by man and armour, blundered at the jump.

Still, it made a game effort to clear the hedge.

Neck and neck they touched the ground on the other side, but the pursuer's steed stumbled. Its rider was flung forward on the crupper, and the sword went spinning from his hands.

Quick as thought, Robin's hand flew out and grasped at the swaying figure. His fingers clutched the visor of the helmet, and then, as his own horse bounded forward, he pulled the wretched man clean from the saddle.

No man encased in all his weight of armour could withstand the shock of such a fall. The Norman's neck was broken, and Robin Hood had one pursuer the less to deal with.

It was now to be a race across country with the rest of the band.

The outlaw determined not to distress his horse, but ride a waiting race.

Unslinging his bow from his shoulder, he took an arrow from the quiver refilled by the ever-thoughtful Dane, and

turning in the saddle sent the shaft into the thick of the Normans.

It emptied a saddle, but the pursuers took no notice of the falling man.

The next arrow caused some confusion. The man who received it lurched heavily against his nearest comrade, and both came down heavily.

Then Robin, deciding to trust no longer to his bow, spurred his horse and settled himself down for the race, which meant death or freedom.

Away went pursued and pursuers over meadows, along paths of flanking fields filled with golden wheat, over hill, dale, and across water-splashes.

Two more miles to Windsor!

If Robin Hood could only reach the royal borough, he would make straight for the castle and claim the protection of the king, which he knew would be accorded him.

How he would laugh at the red-faced Normans who were pelting after him, shouting wildly, and urging on their horses with blows and curses!

Their horses were heavier, but stronger, than the one ridden by Robin Hood.

Was the fable of the stoat and the hare to be repeated?

The stoat, as we know, won in the long run. The story, time-worn even in those remote days, occurred to Robin Hood's mind.

On, on, until his foaming horse began to flag and stagger. On, on, with the thunder of the great horses sounding in his ears.

Robin Hood shook his horse up, and made a final effort.

Before him lay the hill leading to the gates of Windsor Castle.

"Hi! hi!" he shouted. "A few more strides, my noble horse! Only a few more! Perchance you have done as much for a worse man than is now on your back!"

The horse responded gamely, and Robin Hood, waving his hand to his pursuers, who were close on his heels, passed through the gates, just as King Richard left the castle for his morning ride in the park.

"Hold!" he shouted, raising his arm. "What, Robin Hood, back again in

such headlong haste! Why did you leave so suddenly, and without reward or a word of thanks from me?"

"I claim my reward now," Robin Hood said. "I am alone, and beset with enemies. Send me back to Sherwood Forest under an armed escort."

"Beset with enemies?" the king cried, his voice quivering with rage. "Where are the varlets who have dared to raise a finger against you? Ho, there!" he shouted, as the figures of the baffled and now frightened pursuers could be seen madly heading their horses towards the forest. "Gallop after those carrion, and bring them back to me, dead or alive! Gallop, I say, and spare none!"

Amid a clatter of hoofs and jingle of accoutrements a score of his retainers at once set out in pursuit. Then his majesty turned to Robin Hood, saying:

"In sooth, good Robin, things have come to a pretty pass when a bearer of mine own royal signet is waylaid and set upon by vagrants and hireling cut-throats! But you shall go back to Sherwood Forest, and with such an escort as will confound your most desperate enemies. By the splendour of Heaven, it shall be done! And now I will ride a space with you, for I have to ask a favour. It is a favour that means life or death to me—nay, it not only concerns the safety of my person, but the very throne of England!"

"My liege lord," Robin Hood said, "command me when you will!"

THE END.

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